

Preparations

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Category: Forever Knight

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 1999-09-07 08:00:00

Updated: 1999-09-07 08:00:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 09:09:20

Rating: K+

Chapters: 1

Words: 6,204

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Natalie and Janette embark on a new life -- based on a critical decision.

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> This story takes place after my story "For All the Right Reasons."
<p> Disclaimer: Natalie Lambert and Janette DuCharme are the property of Jim Parriott, Paragon and the SciFi Channel. The story, however, belongs to me.<p>

Â Natalie leaned against the sink and crossed her arms. "I'd never really thought about it, to tell you the truth."

Â Â Â Â Â "Well, it might well be worth considering," Janette suggested from her nearly over-flowing bubble bath.

Â Â Â Â Â Nat watched as Janette expertly slid the razor from her ankle to her knee. She wrinkled her nose and said, "It hurts, though."

Â Â Â Â Â Janette glanced at her quickly and smiled, "Well, cheri, you can either spend one hour in wax-inflicted pain and get it over with, or you can spend all of eternity shaving your legs. The choice is yours."

Â Â Â Â Â Nat smiled, "Do you realize that is probably the most compelling argument _against_ being brought across that you've made in the last six months?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette chuckled as she rose from the bear-claw tub.
"Would you please hand me that towel?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie pulled a towel off the shelf and passed it to Janette. "Are you sure you can't come with me?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "I'm sorry, Natalie, you know I can't leave the city now." Janette tousled her hair with the thick towel. "If we want to meet our New Year's Eve opening then I must stay here and oversee preparations."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie frowned, "Maybe I should stay and help."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Wrapping the towel around herself tightly so it would not fall, Janette reached up and caressed Natalie's cheek with her hand. "No, cheri. Go on your trip. See your Hawaiian sunrise. Eat wonderful food. Drink fabulous champagne." Her eyes sparkled. "And when you come home, if you are still sure, I will bring you across."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie leaned her face into Janette's hand and smiled. "OK. I'll go. I still think it would be more fun if you came along, though."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "We have eternity, Natalie."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Nat took Janette's hand in her own. "Yes, we do."

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><p>^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie packed her clothes carefully, tossing her bathing suits in just before closing the lid.<p>

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Five swimsuits?" Janette asked from her seat at the foot of the bed.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie shrugged, "Well, this is going to be the last chance I have to get a tan. And since I don't have to worry about skin cancer or wrinkles anymore, I may as well make the most of it." She reached for her handbag and began checking its contents.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette's smile faded. "Natalie, are you sure?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Nat looked up from her purse to see Janette's eyes clouded with uncertainty again. She sat down next to her and took her hand. "I'm positive, Janette."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette nodded slightly and forced a smile. "Well then, you had better enjoy yourself, doctor. Because upon your return you will begin a new life."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie watched Janette for a moment before realizing that her friend's guard was once again in place. Wishing that the months

of assurances had been enough, Natalie let the subject drop once more. _Best not to press it,_ she thought, _she'll share it all when she's ready._

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette stood and pulled Natalie to her feet. "Come. We don't want you to miss your flight, now do we?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie smiled and followed Janette down the stairs and out the front door.

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><p>^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie sat in her first class seat, drank her complimentary first class champagne, and briefly considered eating her first class meal. Forget it, she thought, _I'm about to give up food forever; this sure as hell isn't going to be one of the last things I taste._ She waved for a stewardess to come take the full plate of food.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Reaching in her purse, she pulled out her small notebook. Janette had given her the little red book and told her to write down everything she wanted to do. She said to make sure to pay special attention to the things that could only be done as a mortal: places to visit, sights to see, food to eat. "Make a list," she had said, "and once you have done everything on it, _then_ I will bring you across."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie had protested at first , saying that any list would be too long, and fulfilling it too expensive. But Janette had silenced her protests with a wave of her hand. She told her to make the list and not worry about inconsequentials such as money.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie opened the book. Her handwriting filled dozens of pages as she listed off everything she had ever wanted to do. Everything she could think of, from sky-diving to visiting the Vatican, was listed. And now almost everything was done. Thanks to Janette.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette had taken her to Europe for two months. Natalie had been able to see all the sights she had always dreamed of while Janette slept in their hotel room. She watched the sun rise and set over the Mediterranean from the shores of five different countries. She tried the best food from the most renowned chefs across southern Europe. And she saw the most incredible art which history had to offer.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Once the sun set, she and Janette went to together. They went to the opera and the theatre and she listened intently as Janette shared her memories of the places they visited. Every town and city had a history that Janette enjoyed sharing. Nat envied Janette for all that her thousand years allowed her see. The Italian Renaissance seemed to be one of Janette's favorites, and her stories from that time were the most vivid. Janette only shared other people's stories, though. She never disclosed personal detail. Natalie could only assume that it was because of her memories of Nick that she avoided the tales of her own life.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ It wasn't until she saw Janette staring out the tinted window at the rising sun one morning in Greece that Natalie realized the vampire might still have regrets about her brief return to mortality. Natalie walked up behind Janette and put her arms around her shoulders. "Let's go home..." she whispered.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ After they returned Janette began planning the opening of a new nightclub. The vampire community in San Francisco was as big as the one in Toronto, and a safe haven would be welcome.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ But the plans for the new club prevented Janette from traveling with Natalie anymore. Many times Janette had planned to accompany Nat, but at the last minute something would come up. Natalie understood. Janette did not want mortality anymore, but neither did she wish to watch Natalie revel in the final days of hers. So Janette stayed home and Natalie worked her way down her check-list.

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><p>^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Barely taking the time to unpack, Nat donned her red bathing suit and wrap and headed for the beach. As Natalie stepped out of the hotel her nose was assaulted by the scents of Hawaii. She smiled and inhaled the bougainvillea and salt air. Squinting against the bright sun, she headed for the most remote cabana.<p>

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Settling into her hammock, she watched the water climb the white sand. Janette's words echoed in her ears, "...after a few hundred years, the view loses it's magic...It gets old, Natalie. Never doubt that."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ She closed her eyes. _Be sure this is what you _really_ want, Nat,_ she warned herself. _If for no other reason, be sure for Janette's sake._

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie's thoughts drifted back to the vampire. She had been so wary of Natalie at first. Even after she agreed to bring her across, Janette still seemed uncomfortable with the idea. Or maybe it was more than that. Janette was so much more nervous than she used to be. She had always seemed so self-confident to Natalie, so sure of herself.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Ever since she arrived in San Francisco, though, she had seen a different side to Janette. _Oh God, Nick, what did you do to her?_ It had to be Nick. She would not talk about him, she would barely even mention his name. And she would not discuss her last visit to Toronto. Or her mortality.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette would very openly speak about Robert, and she frequently mused about his son, Patrick. But the details surrounding her mortality and her return to vampirism carried a pain that was written all over her face. So Natalie did not ask.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Their first trip together had been instrumental in breaking down the barriers between them. Janette reveled in showing Natalie the sights of Europe. Their first night in Paris Janette asked, "What do you want to see first, doctor?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Without hesitation she answered, "The Eiffel Tower."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette gracefully made her way through the crowds of tourists and led Natalie to the railing. Nat leaned against the wall and surveyed Paris appreciatively. "It's beautiful, Janette."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette smiled wistfully. "Yes, it is. No matter how much it changes or how long I am away, Paris will always be home to me."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie looked over at Janette. "Why didn't you come here when you left Toronto?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette stiffened. "It would be too predictable for me to be here."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie understood and nodded. This would be the first place Nick would look for her. "Can I ask you why you chose San Francisco, Janette?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ She nodded slightly. "Since the Americas were first settled, doctor, the west was where anyone went if they wanted to start over. It is the land of new beginnings."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie again looked at Janette. "Then I guess it's perfect. For both of us."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette smiled. "Yes, doctor. It is."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Excuse me, ma'am." Natalie opened her eyes to see a waiter standing next to her hammock.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Yes?" "Would you like a drink from the bar?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Nat smiled flirtatiously. "Absolutely. I think a pina colada would hit the spot about now." The young man smiled back at her and said, "One pina colada for the pretty lady in red, coming up!" Natalie watched as he headed back to the bar in the hotel, before she closed her eyes again.

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><p>^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Thank you," Natalie said as the maitre d' pulled out her chair.<p>

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Someone will be by in a moment to take your order." He handed her a menu and disappeared into the crowd.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie leaned back in her chair and surveyed the crowded dance floor. Her eyes followed a young couple as they danced in the Hawaiian night. Obviously in love, they moved to a rhythm all their own. She watched them glide to the edge of the dance floor before walking down the steps and onto the sand.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie looked at the menu lying on the table and cleared her mind of the lovebirds. Her eyes drifted down the menu before they

stopped on a familiar dish. The waiter appeared at her side and before he could say a word, Natalie gave him her order. "Mahi-mahi with Hollandaise, please."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Yes, ma'am," he said, making his way inside.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie rested her chin on her hands and watched the waves crash on the sand. She thought back to the last time she had ordered that dish....

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Natalie, do you know what you want?" Janette asked as she toyed with her empty wine glass.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Nat glanced around the restaurant and then back at her companion. "Janette, we don't need to eat out. I can make something at home."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette smiled patiently. "Natalie, never subject yourself to work when someone is offering you an alternative."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie smiled slightly. "I just meant that if we have dinner here, you are going to have to sit there while I eat."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "I will have my dinner as well," Janette assured Nat as her eyes followed an attractive young man in a waiter's jacket.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie followed Janette's gaze. Her eyes widened as she whispered, "Here?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette turned to look at Natalie. She laughed. "Not him, Natalie." She reached for her purse and pulled out a small bottle. "I brought my dinner."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Oh." Natalie's face reddened as she returned to the menu. Her eyes darted back at Janette as the vampire poured the contents of the bottle into the awaiting wine glass.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ The waiter returned to the table and eyed Janette's glass for a moment. "Ma'am, we do not permit outside food or drinks in the restaurant."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette looked up at him. "Oh really?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ The waiter's expression dulled as he echoed, "Really."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "But you brought me this glass of wine when we came in. Remember?" Janette's eyes never wavered.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "I remember," the middle aged gentleman nodded slowly.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Motioning at Natalie, Janette continued, "Please, take the lady's order and get back to business."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "The lady's order." He turned to Natalie and shook his head to clear it. "Your order, ma'am?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Mahi-mahi with Hollandaise." Natalie handed him the menu and smiled.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Very well." He took her menu and returned to the kitchen.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie smiled at Janette. "You know, that never ceases to amaze me."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette nodded. "You will be able to do it soon enough, my dear." She took a drink from her glass.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Does it come naturally," Nat asked. "Or do you have to work at it?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Both." She set her glass on the table. "To a certain degree it is automatic. But like any talent, it must be cultivated to be of any real use."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie nodded. "Is it difficult to control it?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette thought for a moment. "At first it can be. I have seen fledglings 'persuade' mortals to do things unintentionally without ever realizing what happened. But, as time passes, you will become more aware of your powers and how to control them."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie opened her mouth to ask another question, then closed it quickly, changing her mind. "Do you mind if I ask you another question?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette picked up her glass again. "In truth, Natalie, I would prefer you ask all the questions you like. It would be far better for both of us if all your questions were answered before I bring you over."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Can one vampire hypnotize another?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette replaced her glass on the edge of the table. "It is rumored to be possible, though I have never seen it done. However, it would take a tremendous amount of power and control. I would not expect that any but the most ancient and disciplined of vampires could successfully accomplish it."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "What about resistors?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "What about them?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Well, supposedly I am one. Yet, Nick was able to erase my memory from Valentine's Day last year."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette shrugged slightly. "But your memory came back."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Nat nodded sadly. "Yeah, it came back."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "That is what happens to a resistor." Janette leaned forward in her chair. "A vampire might be able to exercise enough control to make you forget, but eventually those memories will

return."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "What if LaCroix had hypnotized me instead of Nick?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "That is a good question, Natalie. And I do not have an answer. LaCroix has much more power and control than," she paused awkwardly, "Nichola has ever had. Still, some resistors are just impossible to permanently affect. It is entirely possible that LaCroix would not have been much more successful." Janette watched Natalie for a moment. "May I ask you a question?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Of course."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "What did happen on Valentine's Day..."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Excuse me," Natalie was brought back to the present by a touch to her shoulder.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Yes," she said, trying not to appear too startled.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "I was just wondering if you'd like to dance." The tall gentleman smiled from above her.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ A smile spread across her face. "What the hell? I'm here to have fun, after all." She reached for his proffered hand and followed him to the dance floor.

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><p>^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Even though she was sitting in the shade, Natalie adjusted her sunglasses. Closing her eyes tightly, she leaned back in her chair and concentrated on making the pounding in her head go away. Champagne and rum! No wonder I feel like hell, she scolded herself silently.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Well, if it isn't the pretty lady with all the great moves."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie opened her eyes to find a good looking young man standing over her. He looked familiar, so Nat assumed he had been one of her dancing partners from the night before. But she could not remember his name. Instead, she smiled. "Good morning."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Mind if I join you?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Please do."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "I was wondering," he started as he lowered himself into the next chair. "Are you free for dinner tonight?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie looked over at him for a moment. "Sure," she said before her mind could argue against it.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ He grinned. "Great. Then you want to meet in the hotel restaurant about seven thirty?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "How about nine?" Natalie suggested, "I'm gone be out this afternoon."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ He nodded. "Nine it is." He stood to leave. "See you tonight."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Bye." Natalie smiled as he walked away. _Great, Nat. Now you can spend all day trying to remember his name._

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><p>^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "I'm sorry, what did you say?" Natalie asked, suddenly aware that her date was waiting for her to speak.<p>

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "I said, why don't you tell me something about yourself," Tom (she had not succeeded in remembering his name until the maitre d' called their reservations) repeated as their drinks arrived.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie smiled. _It only took him an hour and a half to stop talking about himself long enough to ask._ "There's not much to tell, actually."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "I find that hard to believe," he said smiling.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie shrugged slightly. "I wouldn't want to give all the mystery away, now would I?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Tom leaned back in his chair slightly. "A woman of mystery. How delicious." His eyes narrowed. "But there must be something you can tell me about yourself."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Who do you think I am?" She smiled playfully as she stirred her mai tai.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "I think you are an enigma." He eyed her carefully. "And I think you're here to get away from something. Husband? Boyfriend?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ _That figures._ Nat's face remained impassive. "Why does it always have to be a man?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Tom shrugged slightly. "It doesn't. It's just the easiest place to start. Your job, then."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Nope. I'm retired."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Tom's eyes lit up. "Retired?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie took a sip of her drink. _Good grief. Is he a bore_ and _a gold digger?_ "Yep."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "So you don't have anyone special in your life?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie set her drink down. "I didn't say that." Tom watched her for a moment, obviously confused. "I just asked you why

you automatically assumed it was a man."

Disappointment crossed his face. "A woman?"

"I have someone very special in my life." Natalie felt a pang of guilt at toying with him, but quickly quashed it. "She had to stay home to work. But I'm not here to get away from her. The exact opposite, actually. I miss her terribly."

Tom looked decidedly uncomfortable suddenly. He finished his drink silently. Looking back at her, he said, "Well, I had a nice time, Natalie." He signed the check and stood to leave. "I hope you enjoy the rest of your trip." He quickly turned and left the restaurant.

"That wasn't very nice of you, Nat," she giggled to herself as he disappeared into the lobby.

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<p>"You afraid of heights, miss?" The pilot asked as he fastened his seatbelt.<p>

Natalie tried to suppress a giggle. "I should hope not."

"Great," he answered as he covered his receding hairline with an old baseball cap. "Let's go."

As the helicopter rose from the ground, Natalie leaned her forehead against the glass. "It's so gorgeous here," she whispered, almost to herself.

"That it is!" The pilot bellowed over the noise of the aircraft. "You ever been here before?"

Natalie shook her head without tearing her eyes from the waterfalls. The colors were so rich. I wish Janette could see this. Natalie leaned back in her seat slightly and smiled to herself. Everything she saw since her arrival had been met with that wish.

It's a good thing she's not here, though, Natalie realized sadly. Spending the day in the hotel room while Natalie explored the islands would not be any fun for her. As much as Natalie wanted to share her discovery of the native flowers and the joys of swimming in the clear Pacific, she knew that it was best that Janette was at home.

Natalie smiled. At home. Home. Janette, San Francisco, their house; that was home. It wasn't just where Natalie returned at the end of the day. It was where she felt comfortable and safe. And loved.

After her helicopter tour of the island, Natalie returned to her hotel room. Checking her watch quickly, she picked up the phone and dialed.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Hello?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Hi Janette."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Hello, cheri." Natalie could almost hear Janette's smile.
"How is your trip?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "It's so beautiful here, Janette."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette's tone became serious. "Tell me what it looks
like, cheri."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie picked up the phone and carried it out onto the
terrace. "The water is so clear you can see all the way to the ocean
floor. And the flowers are exquisite. The whole island smells like
bougainvillea--and they come in the most incredibly shades of red and
pink and purple. The volcano is probably the most powerful looking
thing I have ever seen. And the waterfalls are incredible. The way
they cascade off the cliffs is nothing short of magical." She stopped
for a moment as she watched a couple walk down the beach holding
hands. "I wish you could be here to enjoy this with me,
Janette."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "So do I, cheri," Janette said wistfully.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie returned inside. "Actually, I was calling to tell
you something else, though."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "What is that?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "I'm coming home early."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Are you sure you want to do that, cheri? I would hate for
you to cut your trip short."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "I'm positive, Janette." Natalie sat on the edge of her
bed. "Hawaii isn't going anywhere. You and I can come back another
time."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "It's not the same, Natalie." Janette said
pointedly.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "No, it's not." Nat answered firmly, "It'll be
better."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Well, cheri," Janette said softly, "then you better tell
me when you are coming home. I would not want you stranded at the
airport."

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><p>^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "I don't suppose you want a bite?" Natalie smiled as
she pierced the scampi with her fork.<p>

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "This is an odd time to try turning me back into a mortal,
doctor." Janette teased.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Ha!" Natalie laughed sharply. "Not on your

life."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette cocked her head slightly. "You have not told me the best part of your trip, cheri."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie watched Janette for a moment before answering, "Coming home."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette arched her eyebrow playfully. "Well, at least I know I was missed."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Nat smiled back. "More than you know." She returned to her dinner. Janette had brought her here to celebrate her homecoming. While Natalie ordered her favorite foods from the menu, Janette nursed a glass of 'red wine' that she had produced from her purse. And though neither of them said anything, Natalie ordered what she knew was her last meal.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette leaned forward and looked at Natalie's plate. "I remember loving those," she said. "I discovered how delicious garlic is."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie watched as Janette's smile faded. She reached for her hand and held it firmly. "Janette, if you are not ready for this we can wait."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Non, cheri." Janette squeezed Nat's hand gently. "We have waited over half a year. It is time."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie nodded. "Sooner might be easier, anyway."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Why is that, cheri?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie stroked her thumb against Janette's hand for a moment before answering, "As long as I am mortal --" She looked up from their interlaced fingers and started over. "Janette, I don't know what happened last year. Nick didn't tell me many of the details and you haven't mentioned it since I've been here. But I can see how much it hurt you. But I don't know what hurt you. I don't know if it was just Robert's death; I don't know if it was Nick; I don't know if it was regaining your mortality. But whatever it was, it's still hurts you. And my mortality is a painful reminder of that." Natalie shook her head, "I don't want to hurt you, Janette."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette brought Natalie's hand to her cheek and held it there. "You don't, Natalie. You don't."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "I want you to be able to trust me, Janette." Natalie whispered, "But I'm not going to press you about this. You have done, and are going to do, so much for me. I finally feel like I have someplace I belong, and I don't think you have any idea how much that means to me."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "I do." Janette released her hand.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "I just want you to feel as safe as you've made me feel."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette's eyes rested on a faraway spot across the quiet

restaurant. "It was all of it, cheri. It was Robert. It was Nichola. And it was mortality. I left Toronto because I was beginning to doubt myself, the way Nichola does. I wanted to 'reaffirm the vampire in me.' But I was feeling alone," her eyes returned to Natalie's face, "not unlike how you were feeling when you came in search of me. Robert reminded me that I could live and love without LaCroix and Nichola--that I existed beyond them. For nearly a thousand years, even in the times when we were not together, they were the most important things in my life. I had forgotten what it was like to love anyone else.

Â Â Â Â Â "I was not looking for mortality." She continued, "I was looking for myself. And falling in love with Robert helped me do that. The mortality was just a side affect of that. But then Nichola..." She closed her eyes. "I understand your not wanting to be tied to him, Natalie. I could love him as an equal when we shared the same master. But for him to be my master--that ties me to him in a way that does not allow for equality."

Â Â Â Â Â Natalie's brow furrowed and she opened her mouth to speak but was silenced by Janette, "That is what I fear most about bringing you across, Natalie. You and I both need the same thing. We need a friend, a companion. I am afraid of the inequality that will arise from our positions. I just hope that my 'youth' will help to alleviate some of the gap between us."

Â Â Â Â Â Natalie watched Janette in silence for a moment. "You didn't want him to bring you back across, did you?"

Â Â Â Â Â "No. I asked him to let me die," Janette said curtly.

Â Â Â Â Â Shaking her head, Natalie closed her eyes. "I can't believe he went against your wishes like that."

Â Â Â Â Â "Can't you?" Janette's voice was tinged with bitterness.

Â Â Â Â Â Natalie just looked back at her. "What about now, Janette? Do you still wish that he had let you die?"

Â Â Â Â Â Janette thought for a moment. "I can not forgive him for doing precisely what I asked him not to do." She looked pointedly at Natalie. "But I can no longer say that I am sorry to be immortal again." A sigh escaped her lips. "I am not sure that makes much sense."

Â Â Â Â Â "It does make sense, Janette." Natalie brushed a stray lock of hair from her face and continued, "Nick did what he did for himself, not for you. And the fact that you are glad to be alive doesn't change the fact that he acted against your specific request." She smiled. "But if it's any consolation, Janette, I am glad you're here."

Â Â Â Â Â Janette smiled. "Natalie, have you thought about what Nichola will say when he finds out about you and me?"

Â Â Â Â Â Natalie took a drink of champagne and shrugged. "Haven't given it much thought, really."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette grinned broadly and laughed, "Liar!"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie rolled her eyes dramatically. "Oh all right. Yes, I've thought about it. He won't like it. And he may very well--hell, very _likely_, blame you for it."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "I know," Janette nodded.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Are you OK with that?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "I cannot control Nichola, Natalie. You know that. If he wants to blame me, he will blame me. And there is nothing I can do to change it. You and I know the truth, and that is what matters." Janette sighed and glanced at Natalie's empty plate. Deftly changing the subject she asked, "Do you want dessert?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Nat smiled and waved to their waiter. "I would like the chocolate fondue with fresh strawberries and a raspberry liqueur, please."

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><p>^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "You'd think this place was designed by a vampire," Natalie said as she watched Janette pull the drapes shut.<p>

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Most mortals do tend to find these old Victorian houses to be a little too dark," Janette agreed.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie fidgeted in her seat as Janette returned to sit next to her on the couch. Tucking her feet beneath her, Nat watched as Janette drank her fourth glass of blood.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "You look nervous, cheri."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Nat answered, "Have you looked in a mirror recently?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette smiled as she once again refilled her empty glass. "I admit it. I am a bit anxious. I haven't brought anyone across is a _very_ long time, Natalie. And certainly not in the past year."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "I know." Nat nodded and asked, "Are you having second thoughts?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette eyed her closely before saying, "Non, cheri. No second thoughts."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "What then?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Just concerned."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "About anything in particular?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "About my control. About how you will adjust. About what it will be like to be a part of a family again." Janette took another drink from her glass. "And I must admit, a small part of me is taking

a rather perverse pleasure in knowing that Nichola will be devastated when he learns that you have been brought across."

Â Â Â Â Â Nat leaned her head back against the couch and stared at the ceiling. "I know what you mean. I wish I didn't, but I do." Turning to look at Janette, she asked, "How long do you think it will be before we see him again?"

Â Â Â Â Â Janette cocked her head. "I honestly do not know, cheri. Before Toronto it had been many decades. It could be quite a while. Then again it could be tomorrow. After all," she added, "you did tell me that he had been searching for me, non?"

Â Â Â Â Â "Lucky for me." Nat nodded. "I don't know how far off your trail I threw him, though. It must have been more than I thought -- no sign of him in the last six months."

Â Â Â Â Â Janette countered, "I think your leaving Toronto might have distracted him for a while."

Â Â Â Â Â Natalie shrugged, "Maybe. But not that much. He probably left not long after I did. Without Schanke or me around anymore, his ties to mortality were tenuous at best." With a sardonic smile she added, "And I'm sure that LaCroix was only too happy to oblige."

Â Â Â Â Â "I think you are too hard on LaCroix, Natalie," Janette said finishing off her final glass.

Â Â Â Â Â "Maybe. But face it, Janette, it's not as though he ever gave me much reason to be anything but wary of him."

Â Â Â Â Â "True. But he is not as bad as Nichola would have you believe, either."

Â Â Â Â Â "I know that. But my opinions of LaCroix are more about what I've seen of him than what Nick's told me. I know Nick's view of him is a little lop-sided."

Â Â Â Â Â "That is a bit an understatement, doctor."

Â Â Â Â Â Nat smiled thoughtfully, then asked, "Didn't it ever bother you, though? LaCroix's obsession with Nick? How could you spend all those centuries together and not feel left out?"

Â Â Â Â Â Janette sighed, "Natalie, LaCroix made the same mistake regarding Nichola that both you and I made: we all put him at the center of our lives. And we have all been hurt because of it. We wanted things from him that he could not possibly give us. LaCroix is very much like you and I in that respect."

Â Â Â Â Â Natalie considered the parallel for a moment. "Except it would seem that you and I have learned our lesson. But what about LaCroix? He has spent centuries trying to hold on to Nick--making him the most important thing in his life. And you're right, it hasn't brought him anything but pain, either. So why does he keep doing it?"

Â Â Â Â Â Janette looked at Natalie carefully and said, "I do not

know. He loves Nichola in a way that he can love no one else. Plus, I think that they both find a purpose to their fight. They use it as one of the main cornerstones of their lives. I think they have truly come to need it."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "That's very sad," Natalie said with complete sincerity.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Perhaps. But it is the way things are -- and I don't think it can be changed. Nor do I necessarily think it should be changed. I think they both depend on it too much."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie shifted in her seat and leaned her head against the back of the couch. Looking at Janette she asked, "Do you miss them?"

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette raised her hand to Natalie's brow, her index finger lightly trailing a line down the side of her face. "I used to, cheri. But not any more."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie smiled and reached for Janette's hand. Kissing the tip of Janette's finger she said, "There was a time when I didn't think I would ever get over him. But now--I don't know. I feel like there is whole other life just waiting to be lived."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Janette smiled and stood up. Never letting go of Natalie's hand, she pulled her to her feet. "There is."

^ ^ ^ ^ ^

* * *

><p>^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie sat on the edge of the bed as Janette walked around to the other side. As Nat quickly pulled her sweater over her head, Janette knelt behind her. As a cold hand grazed her bare shoulder, Nat stiffened.<p>

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Relax, cheri," Janette whispered into her ear while her fingers traced Natalie's bra strap.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie nodded stiffly. She looked over her shoulder at Janette, who was waiting patiently for a signal to proceed. Janette smiled softly and kissed Natalie's forehead. "I have an idea," she said.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Before Nat could process the words, she felt a soft thump against her shoulder. She twisted around to see Janette giggling with a pillow in her hands. As a stray feather floated back down to the bed, Natalie realized what had happened.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ "Oh, that's it!" She laughed as she dove for the other pillow. Catching another blow from Janette as she sprawled across the bed, Nat turned over on her back and swung blindly. Feathers drifted through the air as each of them took turns lightly pounding the other with the quickly shrinking pillows. Laughing uncontrollably, Natalie finally collapsed on the bed. Janette propped herself up on one elbow. Her giggles subsided as she gently picked the stray feathers from Natalie's curls.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Natalie watched as Janette's eyes began to glow. Bringing

her hand to Janette's face, Nat moved to kiss her gently. Janette's mouth captured Natalie's upper lip briefly. Janette's hand slid across Natalie's bare stomach as the kiss deepened. Her mouth slowly moved down Natalie's jaw line to her neck. Brushing her long hair aside, Janette's tongue slowly traced the vein in Natalie's neck. Nat moaned softly and leaned her head back. A sharp breath escaped Natalie's lips as Janette's arms slipped around her tightly. Natalie closed her eyes as Janette's fangs sank into her neck.

Â Â Â Â Â The pressure of Janette's arms around her seemed to disappear as Natalie drifted beyond consciousness. She felt herself weaken as her blood escaped her body and fled into Janette's. Natalie felt herself slip into a comforting darkness as the images of Janette's life began to bombard her. The pains and pleasures of her life, both mortal and vampire. Her love and hatred. Hatred for the evils of mortal men who had used and abused her. Gratitude and loyalty to LaCroix for rescuing her. Her love for Nick, and her anger at him. Her inability to forgive him, despite the desire to do so. Her love for Robert and his son. The terrible void left by their loss. And then her. Natalie was overtaken by the warmth and love Janette felt for her.

Â Â Â Â Â Natalie sensed Janette's fangs withdraw, though she could not actually feel them. Distantly she could hear the words, "Sleep, cheri." And as Natalie let herself be enveloped in the darkness she knew that they finally had what they wanted. A new family and a new beginning for them both.

The End

End
file.